

SHEEP

April 2018

Insufficient grass

At the time of writing, grass growth has been way behind normal for the time of year. Even following an improvement in the weather, it will take some time for grass covers to recover to an acceptable level on most farms.

If there is insufficient grass (less than 4cm) during early lactation, milk yield will be low and there is little option but to supplement the ewe.

Scarce grass

If grass is scarce (<3.5-4cm) as a guide, feed 0.75-1.0kg supplement/head/day during the first three weeks to ewes in good condition that are rearing twins. If ewes are in poor condition, increase



the daily allowance by about 0.25kg. In the case of ewes rearing singles, 0.4-0.5kg should be adequate in the majority of situations, with a 25-30% increase if ewes are in poor condition.

No grass

If no grass (less than 2.5cm) is available, the levels referred to above should be increased by a further 1kg per ewe per day for the first three to five weeks of lactation. Ewes will have reached their peak yield at three weeks' post lambing for those rearing singles and five weeks for those with twins. After this, if grass is still in short supply, supplementation should be switched from ewes to providing creep feed for lambs.

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Graze out well

April will be a key month to get paddocks cleaned off well. It has been a difficult spring and growth has been slow. Conditions for grazing have not been ideal. Getting paddocks grazed off well during April is vital to ensure high-quality grass is available during the latter half of May and June when grass can start to

go stemmy. It is very easy for the digestibility (DMD) of grass to drop by five units. This will decrease lamb performance and result in less grass being grown. It is important that grass remains as leafy as possible. Grazing paddocks well in April will help reduce stemmy grass in the following months.

Health issues – lambs

Lambing is nearing an end on most farms at this stage. It is important to remain vigilant over the final few weeks. There is likely to be a build-up of infectious agents such as e-coli. The risk of watery mouth, navel or joint ill all increase if extra care is not taken. Be sure to clean out and disinfect lambing pens required to complete lambing. Use plenty of fresh bedding. Those extra lambs saved will be very valuable when you have them for sale later in the year. Coccidiosis is also a risk factor this year. Lambs become infected orally from faecal contamination such as in the bedding, water troughs or feed troughs. Due to the poor weather, lambs were kept indoors on many farms for longer than normal. Young lambs can easily pick up infection from the environment that has been contaminated by lambs born

earlier in the season. If you do get an outbreak, treatment should be undertaken after consultation with your veterinary surgeon.

Health issues – ewes

Grass tetany

Tetany is one of the biggest killers of lactating ewes at grass. It becomes a risk when we get rapid grass growth when there is high soil potassium (K) levels and poor weather. Prevention can only be carried out by oral supplementation of magnesium (Mg). The target intake level is 5g of Mg per ewe per day. Best results are achieved by feeding high Mg nuts (expensive), high Mg mineral buckets (variable intakes), high Mg bullets (expensive – some sheep may regurgitate bullets), and pasture dusting (17kg/ha per week – not suitable if grass is short). Water supplementation for sheep is an unreliable control method.



HEALTH & SAFETY

Reduce machinery deaths

In April, farming is mainly outdoors with a lot of tractor and machinery movement. Being struck or crushed by machinery continues to cause over 50% of farm deaths. A vehicle moving at fast-walking speed of 8km/h (5mph) travels two metres per second. This puts bystanders at high risk due to the weight and power of a vehicle or machine. Drive slowly in farmyards to reduce risk. Fatal accidents happen also due to operating from incorrect positions and inadequate parking.

Demonstration of a blind zone for a child.



BETTER FARM UPDATE



Ewes and lambs grazing on the BETTER farm of Peadar Kearney on March 15.

Growth rates proving troublesome

FRANK CAMPION of AGRIC, Athenry, Co. Galway on how poor grass growth meant supplementation had to be introduced on many of the BETTER sheep farms.

Lowland flocks

Lambing on the lowland flocks is nearing a close at this point with mainly the yearling ewes left to lamb on most of the farms. In general, lambing went well but grass supplies are behind target on almost all the farms, meaning concentrate supplementation will be necessary in some cases until grass growth rates improve. Introducing supplementation will allow the farms to slow the rotation and allow paddock covers to improve, as opposed to moving too quickly through the first rotation and having the entire farm grazed out before growth rates can increase. Difficult ground conditions have also meant some of the farms were late with their first application of fertiliser, further reducing grass supplies. The flocks will

be put into bigger grazing groups as soon as possible this month to get the grazing rotation into full swing. A further round of fertiliser will also be applied.

Hill flocks

The hill flock farms are reporting that ewe condition is very mixed and for some of the flocks more ewes than normal have been held in for additional feeding over the past couple of months. Once again grass on in-bye ground is an issue for the flocks, with an increase in grass growth rates needed. However, a big focus for the farms in recent years has been correcting soil fertility issues on in-bye ground, so when the weather does improve grass growth rates should respond quickly.



Compact lambing in tough weather



FIONA MCGOVERN, AGRIC, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on the Athenry INZAC flock's difficulties over the past number of weeks.

Lambing commenced in the INZAC flock on February 25. Having our ewes synchronised prior to AI in early October, our lambing spread has been quite compact with 88% of the ewes lambed at the time of writing (March 20). Lamb mortality is running at approximately 8% on average. Lamb birth weights are ranging from 6.12kg for singles, to 5.23kg for twins and 4.4kg for triplets. During this cold weather, the importance of colostrum cannot be underestimated as it provides nutrients, laxatives and vital antibodies to the newborn lambs. Every effort was made to ensure that lambs received ewes' colostrum through suckling or via hand milking and stomach tubing within two hours of birth. Unfortunately, weather conditions were very unfavourable during our first week of lambing, which meant that ewes and lambs remained housed in group

pens before they were let out to grass. During this period, all lambed ewes received 1kg of pre-lambing ration plus *ad lib* silage. Post-turnout ewes are continuing to receive 1kg of concentrate supplementation as grass growth is below normal levels at 7kg DM/ha/day. Grass covers on the first paddocks being grazed are between 5-7cm (800-1,000kg DM/ha), while average farm cover at present is 300kg DM/ha, despite receiving early nitrogen (N) application. This is approximately half of where we would like it to be (600kg DM/ha), which means that we have about 12 days' grazing ahead of us at our current ewe demand of 2.4kg DM/day and stocking rate of 12 ewes/ha. As a result, concentrate supplementation will continue until soil temperatures increase, which will enable grass growth rates to return to more normal levels.